Organizational Development in Public Administration

The Italian Way

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Rethinking the Concept of Competencies for Public Managers

Ernesto De Nito and Mario Pezzillo Iacono

2.1 Introduction

According to some scholars, the reason why the competency model was introduced at the beginning of 1980s was in an attempt to provide an answer to globalization, to complexity, and to changes in the economy.

During that time management, scholars and practitioners reflected on the role of knowledge in the organizations and, in line with the resource-based approach, they suggested that the only way to be competitive was to manage knowledge and, in particular, the human resources of an organization successfully. From a more practical perspective, there was a need to define jobs and skills clearly in different domains: the United Kingdom introduced a

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system to establish performance criteria for each of its sectors (National Vocational Qualification); the United States followed the British example by establishing in 1994 a similar system (National Skills Standards Board).

The Public Sector in the United States and the United Kingdom also introduced this methodology during the 1980s. This choice was coherent with the introduction of New Public Management (NPM). A central element of the concept of NPM is that public organizations should import managerial processes and behavior from the private sector (Boyne & Meier, 2009; De Vries & Nemec, 2013; Esposito, De Nito, Pezzillo Iacono, & Silvestri, 2013). In particular, this approach emphasizes operational efficiency driven by the rationality of managerial systems, showing how practices from private companies can be used in the Public Sector (Chap. 1).

This has led public management and management in the private sector to become increasingly similar (Cunningham, 2016). The competency model is used in many areas of human resource development—recruiting officials, remuneration process, design training, and development programs (Skorková, 2016).

The competency framework proved to be no mere fashion and in the Public Sector, administrations are still intent on applying this method, with its tools and policies, in different ways and to diverse human resources practices.

Despite the fact of the popularity of competences and competence-based management, there is a difficulty in finding an unequivocal definition of the concept (Jałocha, Krane, Ekambaram, & Prawelska-Skrzypek, 2014).

This chapter will go deeper in analyzing the concept of competency according to a managerial perspective, and will then clarify the relation with the Public Sector both from a theoretical and from a practical view. The remainder of the chapter is organized into four sections. The first section explores the concept of competency, distinguishing between the rationalist and positivist approach (entity-based perspective) and the more sociological background (social construction perspective) or situationalist approach. In the second section, we give a broader picture of public management competence, investigating the competency-based Public Administration research and describing the evidence related to the behavioural competences of Italian public employees. The third section analyzes the relationship between human resource management (HRM) practices and managerial competencies in an international and national public context.

In this section, we illustrate the competences models developed by different Italian public organizations.

In the fourth and final section, we analyze the competence model, discussing "the other side of the coin": we argue that this model is also a powerful tool to make different individuals' actions and objectives consistent. In fact, the model defines behavioral (and technical) skills in order to have similar responses in specific circumstances.

2.2 The Concept of Competence in a Managerial Perspective

The competency model was introduced in private sectors during the late 1980s, even if the concept had originally been adopted by David McClelland (1973) a decade before. The author Richard Boyatzis (1982) developed a competency model that took into account nineteen generic characteristics, grouped into five groups: objectives and actions, human resources management, direction, attention to others, and relation to subordinates. His work had a major impact on thinking about management in the United States and was subsequently exported to Britain through management consultants, educational institutions, and US companies in the country. In the same way, his ideas have spread in Europe and around the world (Hondeghem, Horton, & Scheepers, 2005). Nowadays, even in the Public Sector many organizations are familiar with this concept, and in many cases they adopt the model for various human resource management policies (Horton, 2000). In the traditional management literature on competence, there are many different approaches and definitions, but basically two main research areas are defined. The first one refers to a rationalist and a positivist approach: competences are conceptualized as individual resources and an "attribute", as something that people "have", including motives, traits, skills, and bodies of knowledge that are applied during work and lead to performing better or worse (Boyatzis, 1982; Horton, 1999; Sanghi, 2016). The second one has a more sociological background and interprets competence according to a social construction perspective, arguing that competencies realized in socio-material relations are defined by a specific social relational system (Gherardi & Strati, 2017).

2.2.1 The Entity-based Perspective

Literature based on "entity-based perspective" highlights the importance of possessing a body of scientific knowledge together with tacit knowledge and other central attributes like attitudes and personal traits (Sandberg & Pinnington, 2009). McClelland (2001)—the founder of the modern competency movement—introduced the concept of competence to replace the more limited concept of "skill", including additional behavioural aspects and technical capabilities. According to Boyatzis (1982, p. 97), competences are "the behavioral characteristics of an individual which is casually related to effective or superior performance in a job […] an individual's set of competencies reflect their capability or what they can do". Fletcher (1997) defines competences as "the ability to perform activities within an occupation to a prescribed standard" (in Horton, 1999: 3). Finally, Hartle (1995: 107) argues that competence is "a characteristic of an individual that has been shown to drive superior job performance […], it includes both visible knowledge and skills and underlying elements of like traits and motives".

Competency is a capability or ability, it is not something we can easily observe. As suggested by Boyatzis (2008: 6): "It (competency) is a set of related but different sets of behaviors organized around an underlying construct, which we call the intent. The behaviors are alternate manifestations of the intent, as appropriate in various situations or times." Behavior is the key to understand if someone has a competency, and the way we define and measure different behaviors is the way to define and measure the competency. Many scholars adopt this approach suggesting the use of a single definition of competency to associate to a set of different behaviors. For example, to manage a meeting could imply different behaviors such as encouraging or stimulating the dialogue or, on the other hand, stalling the conversation.

This is a universal approach, based on the idea that a competence is valid in different contexts and situations. So, on the one hand if someone has a specific competence, he/she will demonstrate it in different jobs, or, vice versa, similar jobs are based on the same competences. That is why many scholars in this perspective try to build up competency codebooks (see, for example, Spencer & Spencer, 2008).

During the 1990s, the limits of this approach were outlined by the same scholars who introduced the universalistic view. Boyatzis (1998), for example, suggests limiting the use of standard codebooks and developing an in-depth qualitative analysis for eliciting competencies.

McClelland is aware of the uniqueness of competence and state (2001: 482): "One problem with the BEI approach is that each competency study using this method tends to discover a set of competencies that appear unique to that particular job in that company in that organization."

2.2.2 The Situationalist Approach

The concept of competence is presented from a different perspective according to the interpretative and constructionist theories (Gherardi & Strati, 2017). According to a situationalist approach, competence assumes different meanings and senses in relation to the context. As stated by Capaldo, Iandoli, and Zollo (2006: 434): "Psychological aspects are relevant, but in a situated perspective based on Lewin's field theory (1951), behavior is a function of both the person P and the situation S, and much of the competency movement has focused heavily on the P at the expense of the S." This body of studies asserts that the entity-based approaches overlook central aspects of what constitutes competence by treating people and work contexts as separate entities (Velde, 1999). Two main approaches to competence within this interpretative perspective can be distinguished: (1) relational/processual approach and (2) practice-based discourse.

The first stresses the relational and processual view of competence as an unstable and negotiated construct (Lindberg & Rantatalo, 2015). Velde (1999), for instance, conceptualizes competence as the relation between an individual and his/her context, rather than something that represents either end of a scale. Within the relational analysis, "knowing-in-action" becomes the fulcrum of the discourse on competence. Cook and Brown (1999: 387) point out: "If you want to understand the essentials of what accomplished engineers know, you need to look at what they do as well as what they possess." In other words, competence consists of something additional to the knowledge possessed (Sandberg & Pinnington, 2009).

A practice-based discourse on competence is based on the idea of practice as the site of competence and competence realized in socio-material relations (Gherardi & Strati, 2017). Advocates of practice-based approaches argue that competence is defined by a particular social relational system. This conceptualization involves artifacts and social relations embedded in a broader historical practice. Competence is a "way of being" embedded in a socio-material context (Sandberg & Pinnington, 2009) rather than an individual attribute.

Lindberg and Rantatalo (2015: 5) define "evaluations of competence as inferences of suitable activity that define a given individual's ability to carry out actions in a given professional practice".

While the literature interprets the concept of competence in very different meanings and with different frameworks, the diffusion of tools of the competence model denotes the pervasiveness of the entity-based perspective in both private and public organizational practices (Boyatzis, 2008).

In this line of research, competences are typically considered as a tool to legitimize an organizational model oriented toward the empowerment, accountability, and autonomy of the jobholder.

2.3 Competencies for Public Managers

Following the development of a set of political, socioeconomic, technological, and regulatory factors over the past few decades, public systems have undergone major changes to innovate and improve the efficiency of their equipment, or at least they tried. Indeed, as the context within which public organizations operate has changed, an overall need for transformation has risen to ensure the delivery of innovative and high-quality services to groups of users with varying and increasingly complex demands.

The approach to productivity and efficiency in public action has thus grown alongside with the growing demand to effectively guarantee the rights of individuals and promote the development of communities with careful planning and regulation. At the same time, the recent economic and financial crises are increasing the complexity faced by public management and demand addressing both the approaches and action models for spending review and the change of organizational and human resource practices.

Many OECD countries, following the NPM guidelines, introduced private principles and instruments in the public field to improve the efficiency, effectiveness, and financial stability of state organizations. In the opinion of Cavalluzzo and Ittner (2004), the basic assumption of these initiatives is that the strategic performance indicators can improve public efficiency and effectiveness by increasing accountability and improving the decision-making of public administrators.

The recent Italian public reform strategies rest on three pillars (Esposito et al., 2013): first, modernization of the Public Administration; second, innovation and digitalization within the Public Administration and the country more broadly; finally, improvement of the relationship between the Public Administration and citizens and businesses.

In coherence with the New Public Management, the overall purpose of the reform is to ensure the highest level of accountability for the state toward its citizens and to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of Italian Public Sector work by raising the quality of public services and by boosting productivity factors. The reform emphasizes the need to reach these ambitious goals through a new management approach oriented toward a continuous improvement of performance, the adoption of the benchmarking method and the measurement of customer satisfaction. In the lawmaker's opinion, this requires an integrated system of evaluation, incentives and reward based on results and practiced skills and competence. This view is consistent with the idea of competitive selection of the best individuals and organizational units, rewarding them in monetary and nonmonetary terms on the basis of innovative capability and excellence in performance.

Competency management is an idea that was developed in the private sector and transposed to the Public Sector during the 1990s (Horton, 2000). In the Public Sector, competency management involved a new way of looking at careers and evaluations. Traditional Public Sector careers are based on qualifications, exams, and seniority, while the introduction of competencies puts an emphasis on the "assets" people have for the organization.

A 2002 study of competency management in the Public Sector, however, revealed that at the end of the twentieth century it was by no means yet a universal practice even in those countries, such as the United Kingdom, which had led the competency movement (Horton, 2010).

Nowadays, competency management is a real trend in the Public Sector (Gupta, Chopra, & Kakani, 2018). The truly essential resource in any change in management processing often proves to be managerial competence when managing "emerging" organizational models and practices (van der Voet, 2014). Under this view, managers' competences are essential to interpret these patterns and to make a lasting impact on the running of administrations and, in tum, on their actual efficacy and efficiency.

2.3.1 Competency-based Public Administration Research

In organizational literature, many studies have attempted to examine and document competencies needed by public administrators.

Noordegraaf (2000) identifies three groups of key competences of public managers: interpretative competencies, institutional competencies, and textual competencies. The author underlines that the specificity of the competent Public Sector manager is his/her ability to operate effectively in an environment that is unstable due to the political situation.

Virtanen (2000) identifies five competence areas of Public Sector managers:

- Task competence, including all competences defined as skills or behavioral techniques (e.g., communication or data analysis);
- Professional competence in the subject area: competences either in substantive field of the line organization (e.g., social security) or in the specific task field in the techno-structure of the organization (e.g., HRM);
- Professional competences in the area of administration, related to execution of the policy given by politicians;
- Political competences connected with values and power—the ideology and interests of a public manager set the value competences;
- Ethical competences, referring to conforming to moral values and moral norms that prevail in the culture. Without ethical competence, public managers cannot use their professional or political competences correctly and to full effect.

Bowman, West, Berman, and Van Wart (2016) argue that successful public managers must possess "skills triangle", which comprises three different types of competences: technical, leadership, and ethical.

A number of studies have also attempted to analyze Public Sector competencies in specific countries. The Australian Public Service Commission identified skills like leading people, leading change, strategic thinking, decision-making and judgment, and people and organizational development (Australian Public Service Commission, 2015; Gupta et al., 2018). The United States Office of Personnel Management developed the executive core qualifications for the senior executive service that include leading change, leading people, results driven, business acumen, and building coalitions (United States Office of Personnel Management, 2015).

More recently, Darling and Cunningham (2016) suggested a range of distinct Public Sector competencies (very different from those identified as critical for the private sector environment), including managing competing interests, managing the political environment, communicating in a political environment, interpersonal motivational skills, adding value for clients, and impact assessment in decision-making.

According to the authors, private sector competencies reflect private sector environments, where goals need to be specifically defined and implemented in a timely manner related to making a profit and surviving in a competitive environment. Public Sector competencies are driven by environments exhibiting more complex and unresolvable problems and the need to respond to conflicting publics and serving the public good while surviving in a political environment.

Finally, Gupta et al. (2018) identify important competencies needed for public administrators. Based on focus group discussions and a survey of 218 Indian Administrative Service officers, the authors identified eight competencies: namely, people first; leading others; integrity; decision-making; planning, coordination, and implementation; problem-solving; self-awareness and self-control; and innovative thinking.

2.3.2 Behavioral Competencies of Italian Public Managers and Employees

The spread of cross-cutting (or soft) competencies among Italian public managers and employees was analyzed in the project "Organisation, Learning and Competences in Public Administration" (OLC-PA, 2014), carried out by the Department of Public Administration of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers in 2014. The subject of the survey was the mapping of soft skills, particularly focusing on the skills that were useful in ensuring continuous improvement of processes and services in Public Administration. The OLC-PA survey interviewed some 2000 civil servants in all government levels and sectors (sample survey on public managers and employees, excluding judges, university professors, armed forces, diplomats etc.). The analysis considers the varied skills of managers and employees as combinations of elementary organizational behaviors developed by workers during their career: for example, "solving problems", "performing their work despite considerable difficulties", "joining a group effort", and so on. On the one hand, the report highlighted positive signs in reference to the high diffusion of problem-solving, team working, and literacy skills. On the other hand, the insufficient spread of competences related to the care of others, interaction, analysis, and programming highlights possible problems in work relationships, with specific reference to the scarce diffusion of management styles based on *coaching* and the ability to effectively manage staff, time, and resources.

Problem-solving, the most widespread behavioral competence, is more apparent among managers, graduate doctors, and nurses and teachers, while group work is significantly more widespread in the health professions. Finally, autonomy is confirmed as a characteristic competence of highly qualified professional groups (managers, doctors, and registered nurses).

More recently, in 2018, at the PA Forum, a survey was presented by the same forum on the skills of Italian public managers, through the analysis of a sample of about 1350 people. Of these, 81%, or 1091, people were civil servants, of whom 31.8% were employed in regional governments and local autonomies and 14.8% in ministries and Presidency of the Council, while 10.4% were employed in universities and research centers. The analysis shows that 43.6% of workers in the various sectors of the Italian Public Administration claim to have "more than adequate skills" than those needed in their daily work and 34.5% consider their skills as "adequate". The training received in the last year was judged useful by 80% of those who benefited from it, even though the workers claimed that the main reason for the growth of their skills was self-training (48.5%) and exercise of their respective roles (31.2%), rather than the training received (9.5%). Six out of ten managers received training in 2017. Updating as necessary is mainly linked to specialist knowledge related to one's professional sector (29.4%), regulatory knowledge (27.2%), and technological skills (20.5%). Only 12.8% of public managers perceived an ad hoc training path focused on relational skills and 8.6% perceived training focused on managerial skills as necessary. In essence, the analysis shows that those who work in the public domain feel no need to acquire managerial, relational, communicative, or organizational skills.

This situation, which does not seem to be perceived as critical by public managers, instead appears clear to those who find themselves interacting with the PA: according to citizens and companies involved in the FPA Panel, the gaps to be filled primarily in the Public Administration are precisely the organizational (30.6%) and managerial skills (23.4), skills which public employees do not believe require updating and those for which less training is provided.

2.4 HRM Practices and Managerial Competencies in the Public Context

The need to adopt the competence model in the Public Sector is no novelty in many countries, and many Public Administrations are implementing the model (in different ways). In general, their main aim is to build up a competence portfolio that could be applied in the different human resources practices: selection, education, evaluation, and so on. It is a model designed to encompass the whole organization, a widespread adoption of a material practice that influence people. As suggested by Bhatta (2001: 94): "There is a growing trend now for governments to employ the competency approach to anchor Public Sector management, including but not limited to leadership development, strategic human resource management, training and development, and succession planning."

The competency model could be applied in the selection process through a variety of candidate assessment techniques (e.g., structured interviews, online tests, and work sample assessments). To stress the competence approach in the selection phase is conceived as a way to select the right people for the right job, but even more important it is a way to introduce a strong change in the organizational culture. This is true especially in the Italian Public Administration where typically selection is based on tests and exams based on specific and technical knowledge. In training and development practices, the competency approach is designed to identify the gap and the learning needs assessment. The next step is to create a development plan for each employee (or for specific categories) listing the specific competencies the employee needs to develop for improved performance.

In the performance management approach, competencies clarify what is expected from individuals. The competency model becomes a way to evaluate people and to define what are individuals' aims in terms of specific behaviors, defining a roadmap for remuneration systems for employees based on the development and application of the competencies the organization has identified as important for success. Obviously, the evaluation system could be used also for supporting career development.

The adoption of a competency model in the public sector is no novelty in the European region. As mentioned by Horton (2010: 11): "The British civil service embarked upon a competency approach to HRM during the early 1980s. It was one of the first civil services to do so. In 1987, influenced by the Management Charter Initiative and its National Vocational Qualification framework for managers and working with outside consultants, Price Waterhouse, the Civil Service College developed a competency-based training programme for the top seven grades of the service."

Since then many other European countries have followed this example, slowly introducing different strategies and tools related to the competency framework.

In Belgium, for example, this modernization process began later (Hondeghem et al., 2005): it was only in the 1990s that the effects were observed. In 1999, the Belgian government introduced a competency model related to remuneration policy and based on five plus one competency (five groups of generic or managerial competencies and one group of technical skills).

Nowadays, the model is adopted in many European countries and is considered as a relevant strategic choice in public human resource management. In 2016, the United Nation Evaluation Group (UNEG) revised the competency model. As suggested in the final report (UNEG, 2016: 2): "These revisions reflect the substantial consensus that evaluation competencies are important not only for evaluators and evaluation unit heads, but also for evaluation commissioners and users."

The 2016 Survey on Strategic Human Resources Management in Central/Federal Governments of OECD Countries shows how the competency framework is nowadays part of the public organizations. As stated in the *Skills for a High Performing Civil Service* final report (OECD, 2017: 8): "The use of competency framework is a clear trend in OECD countries, with a primary focus on leadership, behavioural and cognitive competencies."

The literature and a number of documents from European institutions show different experiences in terms of competency models in several European countries. A report published in 2014 shows clearly which are the main areas and human resource policies where the competency model is applied. The authors of this report addressed a survey to 36 countries and to the European Commission and obtained 26 responses, plus the European Union.

The survey investigated (a) the institutional framework for regulating competency management in central governments, (b) how staff and managers are recruited and the role and methods of competency assessment, (c) national practices for managing competencies and, in particular, the methods of competency mapping and building, with respect to present and prospective population needs, (d) the diffusion of learning organization and/or high performance work organization (HPWO) practices, (e) the existence of national practices for performance assessment at various levels, and (f) the relation between competencies and labor mobility.

The results confirm the widespread adoption of a competency approach in many countries. For example, in terms of recruiting, "the vast majority of respondent European countries (23 out of 26), as well as the Commission, declare that they use specific tools, other than direct recruitment, for selecting candidates for public employment." Competency assessment is nonetheless mandatory for 19 countries out of 26 (B3.b), but only 18 report that they have standard procedures to assess candidates' competencies, as does the Commission (Tronti, Della Rocca, & Tomassini, 2014: 8–9).

Moreover, many countries adopt a process of job and competency mapping, which is more frequently updated every year (in Ireland, Sweden, Latvia, Austria, Bulgaria, Romania, and Portugal), or every three years, while other countries update their repertoires only when needed. In particular, it is very interesting to quote the French experience: in the area of jobs and competencies repertoires, French introduced the RIME (*Répertoire Interministériel des Métiers de l 'État*) in 2006 and updated it in 2010 and 2017. This tool identifies all civil service jobs, reflecting the great diversity of activities carried out by the Public Administration and public institutions. There are now 282 reference jobs (261 in the 2010 edition) divided into 28 functional areas (26 in 2010). It maps all the jobs in the state, occupied by permanent or contractual staff whether of civil or military status and the administrative position of the staff members in the organization (about two and a half million people involved). This has become a core tool for HR managers, whether to successfully recruit personnel, to increase professional training, or to facilitate mobility. The RIME is accompanied by the *Dictionnaire interministériel des compétences de l 'État* (DICo), which lists the generic competencies (know-how, attitudes, and knowledge) expected in the different jobs of the state and offers them a shared definition. The new version of the DICo now has 151 competencies (127 *savoir-faire*, 24 *savoir-être*) and 36 areas of knowledge. With the aim of better supporting the construction of career paths in the public service, the new DICo proposes an identification of "transferable" competencies, which constitute a technical "base of competencies" common to several professions in the same functional area, as well as "cross" competencies, which are generic skills common to a set of occupations in several functional areas.

2.5 Competency Model and HRM: Italian Practices

As we pointed out, the competency model can be applied in the different human resources practices: selection, education, training, evaluation, and so on. In this paragraph, we illustrate some successful cases of application of the competency model in Italian Public Administrations. In particular, we explore three case studies:

- The competency portfolio developed by the Campania Region linked to an ad hoc training program for its managers;
- The competence mapping adopted by INPS[1] to develop a learning process of the management:
- The creation of a dictionary developed by the Region of Sardinia for the implementation of various actions: training courses, personnel assessment, and personnel recruitment.

The collection of data was carried out using a heterogeneous plurality of instruments: institutional document analysis (Sardinia Region and INPS case studies), semi-structured interviews, and participant observation (Campania Region). In case of Campania Region, during their fieldwork, the two authors spent two to three days a week on the shop floor, designing the training program of the management.

2.5.1 The Competency Portfolio Developed by the Campania Region

The main purpose of the competency portfolio developed by the Campania Region in 2014–2015 was to offer the regional management an opportunity to improve its professional skills and, at the same time, provide the region with a cognitive framework of the competencies most prevalent within the organization. In particular, from a manager's perspective, the main benefits were in relation to the following:

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[1] National Institute of Social Security (INPS) is the main social security institution of the Italian public pension system, in which all public or private employees must be enrolled and most of the self-employed workers who do not have their own autonomous pension fund.

- Recognizing and valuing what they know and can do thanks to behavioral skills gained through professional and extra-professional experiences.
- Identifying strengths and improvements in their skills and any elements/areas to be developed.
- Building and developing their own professional development project.
- Identifying training needs.

From the organization's perspective, the main reasons for the adoption of this tool were the following:

- To have a framework of the behavioral competencies most prevalent within the organization based on the indications that emerged from the competency profile.
- To try out a human resources device based on enhancement and development of the organization's managerial resource capital, through the use of the competency profile.
- To define training plans aimed at developing strategic behavioural competencies.

The entire process, implemented with the consultancy support of Formez PA[2], was divided into three phases:

- The first phase, presentation, involved all actions aimed at disseminating the contents, strategy, and implementation methods of the process. A communication strategy was devised and implemented through information actions that allowed the involvement not only of the recipients of the competency profile but also the leaders of the regional administration.
- The second phase, analysis, covered all the steps required for the effective mapping of the managers' competencies. The goal of the activities associated with the second phase was to draft an effective "diagnosis" of the existing competencies of each manager, which could be improved in terms of the competence levels required for exercising the assigned roles to identify gaps, that is, existing after implementation of the process.

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[2] Formez is an Italian semiprivate institution based in Rome, with branches in Naples and Cagliari, which assists, among others, the Department of Public Administration in the coordination of training policies within the public sector.

The analysis activity was organized in two steps: a workshop, involving about seven hours of work, in which individual and group activities were examined (elements of assessment and comparison of oneself in situation and, in particular, of oneself in relation); a structured individual interview to reconstruct biographical elements and daily routines, analyze aspirations, and discuss what emerged in the workshop, focusing on any differences between the manager's self-assessment and the hetero-evaluation by the profile consultant.

- The third phase comprised all the activities to provide feedback to the people involved in the process and an overall view of the results that emerged from the region. In particular, feedback was provided for the individual managers, who were given all the results obtained in the previous phase and the regional administration through a report containing considerations on the activity conducted and the results that emerged.

Following the drafting of the competency portfolio, the region designed an *ad hoc* training program for its managers (almost 200), in collaboration with the National Administration School, in order to develop and enhance behavioral competencies. The aim of the course was to provide the participants with the principal knowledge and skills required for the management, development, and enhancement of personnel, particularly in regard to the organizational behaviors involved in the development of leadership skills in work groups and the ability to manage organizational conflict through negotiation. In other words, the training course was aimed at supporting managers in the development of new and effective managerial and organizational practices for the enhancement of personnel in their specific work settings.

2.5.2 Competency Mapping and Learning Process: The INPS Case

The current reorganization process in INPS has highlighted the need to identify the competency profiles required for the effective performance of the institute's new functions, in accordance with a service model based on the services offered to users. The new competency profile was outlined during the INPS management conference, held on 23 January 2016, and is strongly geared toward an advanced and personalized consultancy model.

Its innovative aspect is the multidisciplinary approach that the new professional figures (technical specialists/expert consultants/inter-functional specialists) should possess, namely a set of skills and abilities composed in relation to the specific needs of the various user segments, based on a logic of focusing on the service offered and timely response to individual customer needs. Therefore, the entire INPS operational know-how has been divided horizontally into processes, within which each operator can recognize their usual operations. The processes can in turn be divided vertically into levels (core/technical/professional level), which allow employees to measure the "weight" of their interaction with the system. With regard to the staff currently employed by the organization, although competency mapping is lacking as a management tool, a sample survey of the present staff competency system has been launched in connection with the new values, objectives, and organizational approaches. This survey has enabled the definition of evolutionary scenarios for each competency profile, the planning of training activities for overall staff development, and the preparation of a repertoire of operational knowledge and skills to be incorporated into a permanent knowledge management system. This has been implemented through the creation of a "Knowledge Portal", namely a reference hypertext structure into which all aspects of corporate know-how can be channelled. Its primary task is to collect and maximize the existing information sources in a single categorized list of electronic resources (*INPS informa*, website, teaching materials, risk, and control manual, circulars and messages, legal texts, IT procedure manuals, and workflows and standardized process flows). Therefore, the main purpose of the competence mapping applied by INPS was to develop a learning process that linked the relationship between human resourse skills and the services provided.

2.5.3 The Dictionary of Behavioral Competency of the Sardinia Region

The definition of the Dictionary of Behavioral Competency of the Autonomous Region of Sardinia was developed in two phases over the period 2017–2018. The first phase, aimed at identifying an initial map of the management's competencies, was based on various sources:

1. Research by Formez PA and the literature on the subject of competencies, particularly management skills;
2. Experiences of other Italian regions (Campania, Emilia Romagna, Lombardy, Tuscany) and some national Public Bodies;
3. The results of 24 interviews conducted with managers and senior figures in the Region of Sardinia, aimed in particular at outlining the features of the managerial role in the region, and the range of competencies that characterize it.

In the second phase of the analysis, the competency map identified through interviews with managers, which initially included a total of 40 competencies, was simplified by identifying the 30 most relevant competencies.

The management's dictionary of competency was conceived of as a kind of compass for orientation and a work tool for personnel management, as well as for the managers themselves. In the perspective of the Region of Sardinia, the creation of the dictionary was necessary for the implementation of various actions/tools:

- The analysis of training needs and the didactic planning of ad hoc training courses;
- The creation of personnel assessment methods that place the assessment of competencies, and of progress in terms of increase in competencies, at the heart of the assessment system;
- Personnel recruitment, providing a clear reference for the creation of transparent and objective selection tests, which can help in the recruitment of new personnel or in deciding career advancements through evaluation of the competencies possessed.

The establishment of a work group or project unit, in particular for identification of the coordinator and/or facilitator, especially when persons from different departments or with different professional roles meet and operate in a coordinated manner to address and solve complex problems.

2.6 The Competency Model: The Other Side of the Coin

Competency-based human resource management is nowadays considered as a common practice since David McClelland (1973) first proposed it as a key to investigate performance. As suggested by Boyatzis (2008: 5): "Today, almost every organization with more than 300 people uses some form of competency-based human resource management. Major consulting companies, such as The Hay Group, Development Dimensions International, and Personnel Decisions Incorporated and thousands of small consulting firms and independent consultants have become worldwide practitioners of competency assessment and development." What clearly emerges from practitioners and literature is the widespread adoption of the model according to the rationalistic view. As suggested by Horton (1999) in the managerial stand, the competency movement was focused to investigate the employment context seeking to understand the basis of excellence. As mentioned earlier, its contribution to determining a superior performance is what really identifies a competency. It is the classical approach of the one best way, moved forward: the main goal of the manager is to identify which are the main characteristics that make a performance superior. The idea is that if you cannot standardize the process, you have to identify the individual characteristics that could assure a best performance. This way of thinking is perfectly in line with the tayloristic approach: to determine by scientific method the best way to realize small parts of the production process. Nowadays the opportunity to define the best standard for the production process is not always considered a valuable concept (Ezzamel, Willmott, & Worthington, 2001; Spicer, Alvesson, & Kärreman, 2009). The complexity, the ambiguity and the uncertainty of the environment makes this organizational choice increasingly less efficient. As stated by Altmann, Kohler, and Meil (2017: 4): "Since the end of the 70s, empirical findings and analyses based on them have been produced for important areas of German industry. These have demonstrated that under certain technological, economic and social conditions, rationalization processes which are not directed toward the intensification of a division of labour and a deskilling of work, but on the contrary are based on professional competence in carrying out work, can be in the company's interest. In other large industrial nations in which tayloristic strategies exhibiting a highly advanced division of labour and polarization of skills appeared fixed, similar developments have been documented."

The so-called post-tayloristic scholars (Hook, 2007; Morgan & Spicer, 2009; Piore & Sabel, 1984) sustain the need for more autonomy and responsibility in job design. The competency model appears to suit this aim perfectly: its main goal (and the general associated value, both in public and in private contexts) is to be able to put the right people in the right place. Human resources, who own specific competencies, will be able to manage uncertainty. In this sense the competency model is conceived (or presented) as a way to make the employee free. She/he will not be obliged to follow instructions and standardized rules but will find the right solution purely because she/he has the right competencies. Not only does the theoretical foundation of the competency model appear inspired by the tayloristic approach, but so, evidentially, does the way it is built up. Horton (1999) states that there are different ways of developing a competency framework that include analyzing past behaviour of good performers, benchmarking competency against practice in similar organizations, and trying to predict what competencies the business will need in the future.

The language is symptomatic, Horton (1999: 9), for example, states: "Among the most popular of the more scientific methods used are the critical incident technique, behavioural event interviews and the repertory grid (Adams, 1997)."

All these techniques are proposed in a similar way, the tayloristic way as the one best way. Under this point of view, competency development becomes a lever for standardizing values, a representation of the organizational ideology seen, in terms of Kunda (1992), as an authoritarian system of meanings construed like a map by the power holder in order to decipher the reality and act accordingly. In this sense, managers try to build up a common culture based on the idea of competency, disseminating these values within the organization. For example, when McClelland (2001) implemented a competency framework for executives, he gave people feedback from their BEIs, facilitating the idea that competences were a key asset to manage in order to improve performance and further careers. As stated by McClelland (2001:482): "Such guidance has a powerful effect on behavior and performance. Detailed information of this sort has also provided a basis for career counselling and for explaining why a person should or should not be promoted." It is quite clear how this model could influence people in terms of behavior. If you know, your career depends on your competency and on your behavior, you will align them to the best performers.

In fact, the controlling mechanism tends to self-regulation and self-discipline rather than the traditional heterogeneous form.

In line with a critical approach, while the rationale of organizational programming is apparently oriented toward the pursuit of flexibility, autonomy, and enhancement of personal qualities, in reality it operates as an attempt to extend and render more comprehensive the capacity for standardization and control. Management seeks to act on sense of responsibility and enhancement of individual (and group) competences in order to construe models of action for the organizational actors in a logic of self-discipline.

In this view, the rationale of competency development was oriented toward the pursuit of flexibility, autonomy, and enhancement of empowerment; it operated to extend the capacity for standardization and self-regulation and make this more comprehensive. Using a control view of competency model, the "newness" of practices and organizational approaches designed and implemented by management to develop the individual competency is an "illusion". These practices are only an apparent departure from standardization and the processes of change prove to be largely superficial.

In a post-constructivist light, many of the so-called new practices and "new organizational approaches" associated directly or indirectly with competency development are merely illusions of empowerment, representing only an apparent departure from standardization. They reflect an organizational discourse which reiterates the idea of rhetoric as a tool of persuasion and manipulation, by means of announcements of processes of change which prove to be merely superficial. The emphasis on the duality of organizational rhetoric and action serves as a lens to identify the potential of real (or indeed false) innovation in human resources management, thereby reducing the risk of the illusions of novelty embedded in the concepts of empowerment and autonomy.

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